

Biographical Portrait

JULIUS STERLING MORTON

BY BYRON ANDERSON

Julius Sterling Morton (April 22, 1832 to April 27, 1902), newspaper editor, politician, conservationist, and Secretary of Agriculture, is most noted for being the man who first proposed the idea of Arbor Day, the tree planter's holiday. Born in Adams, New York to Julius Dewey and Emeline Sterling Morton, the father was a prosperous produce commission businessman. The majority of Morton's early years were spent in Albion, Michigan where he was educated at the Wesleyan Seminary. He attended the University of Michigan, but received his B.A. degree from Union College in Schenectady, New York. He worked for a while as a reporter for the Detroit Free Press, a vocational identification he gained through his uncle and grandfather, both of whom were newspaper publishers. In 1854, he married

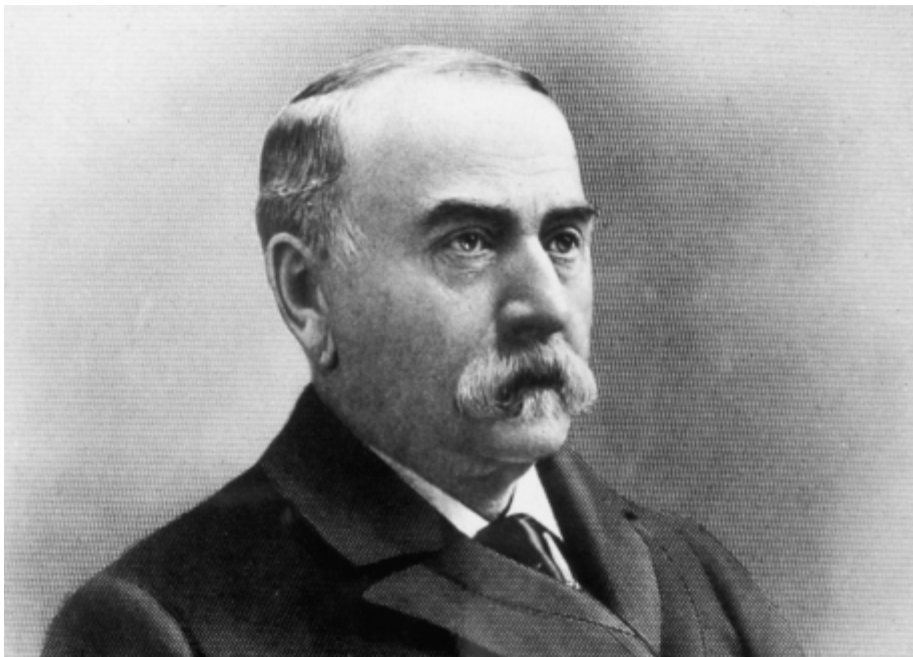
Carolina Joy French, and together they moved to Nebraska and eventually settled in Nebraska City. There, Morton started the Nebraska City News.

In Nebraska, J. Sterling Morton, as he now signed his name, assumed political leadership in the new territory. He was a Democrat who clung tenaciously to party traditions, and was an uncompromising conservative from a section of the country that seemed to produce only radicals. Through a protégé's influence, President James Buchanan appointed Morton secretary of the Nebraska Territory in 1858, and from September 1858 until May 1859, he served as acting governor. In 1860, he was a candidate for Congress, and received a certificate of election from the governor. The seat was contested in the Congressional House, and because it was overwhelmingly Republican, Morton lost. This

was the beginning of a series of defeats in political elections in which he played the trying role of a Democrat from the North during and after the Civil War. In the meantime, his political activity found expression in writing and speaking, and he remained uncompromising in his conservative views.

Morton turned his attention from political contests to the quarter section of land on which he made his home. Of primary consideration was the planting of trees. He experimented with various types of trees, both forest and fruit, and attempted to find varieties that would do best in the soil and the climate of Nebraska. Though not a working farmer, agriculture was an important part of both his personal and political life. For many years he was president of the State Board of Agriculture. More than this direct involvement in agriculture was the zeal with which Morton spread agricultural information and promoted agricultural advancement. As editor, he constantly advocated for improved agriculture, and was most enthusiastic in his praise of tree planting. To Morton, the Nebraska prairie would benefit through trees because they would provide lumber, fruit, and windbreaks, as well as hold the moisture in soil. He recognized an aesthetic value to trees and linked this to his belief that individuals who took pride in their own home would be more patriotic.

Morton believed that Nebraska could be made into a great agricultural and horticultural state. As a result, he offered a resolution to the State Board of Agriculture that the 10th day of April 1872, be "set apart and consecrated for tree planting in the State of Nebraska, and the State Board of Agriculture hereby name it Arbor Day; and to urge upon the people of the State the vital importance of tree planting." It was



Julius Sterling Morton.

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL ARBOR DAY FOUNDATION

unanimously adopted. Morton dubbed this “the battle against the treeless prairies.” As part of a promotional effort to encourage tree planting, Morton said in a letter to the Omaha Daily Record, dated April 17, 1872, “There is no aristocracy in trees. They are not haughty. They will thrive near the humblest cabin on our fertile prairies, just as well and become just as refreshing to the eye and as fruitful as they will in the shadow of a king’s palace.” As an added incentive, provision was made for prize monies to go to the individual who planted the largest number of trees. The first Arbor Day proved unexpectedly popular with over one million trees planted.

So successful was Arbor Day that it was made an annual event beginning in 1874, and in 1885 the state legislature passed an act specifying April 22, the anniversary of Morton’s birth, as the date on which Arbor Day would henceforth be celebrated as a legal holiday. The idea eventually spread to all U.S. states and many foreign countries. Because it was never made a federal holiday, and because of regional differences in climate, Arbor Day is celebrated in different ways at various times around the world. The most commonly observed day in the United States is the last Friday in April.

The idea of Arbor Day was timely as concern had been building over the rapid utilization of forests throughout the United States. As early as 1864, George Perkins Marsh’s publication *Man and*

Nature or Physical Geography as Modified by Human Action aroused widespread interest in the seriousness of the problem. A central point of Arbor Day programs was that wise conservation practices were the responsibility of every citizen.

When Morton proposed Arbor Day, he did not mention its application to schools. This idea was approached in 1883 by B.G. Northrup before a meeting of the American Forestry Association. He offered a resolution in honor of observing Arbor Day in schools. While slow in adopting the plan, schools came to observe the day not only by planting trees, but also by special programs as well. Typical of these programs, each child would dedicate a tree to a person of importance in the city, state, or nation. The day became, in part, a patriotic holiday.

Arbor Day was influential in inducing Congress to pass the Timber Culture Act of 1873. The law offered free land to settlers who would plant trees on the claims. The Act helped stimulate tree planting, but was generally not successful, and was repealed in 1891.

Morton’s highest political honor came in 1893 when President Grover Cleveland appointed him Secretary of Agriculture. Morton was the first man from west of the Missouri to serve in a cabinet post. In Morton, Cleveland had an outstanding exponent of sound money, low tariffs, and economy in government, as well as his standing as an agriculturalist. At the same

time of this appointment Morton served as president of the American Forestry Association. During his four years in the cabinet, Morton and Cleveland found much to admire in each other’s conservatism and undying devotion to principle. Morton’s economizing led him to turn back to the treasury over 20 percent of the appropriated 5.2 million dollar departmental budget, while at the same time expanding and improving the services of the Department of Agriculture. He added three new lines of scientific investigation—agrostology, agricultural soils and crop production, and road improvement. He inaugurated a Section of Foreign Markets to study ways in which to extend foreign markets for U.S. agricultural products and he improved the Weather Bureau.

As part of his economizing in government expenditures, Morton was determined to stop waste. One of the bigger wastes he saw was the promiscuous free distribution of rare and uncommon varieties of seeds by congressmen to their constituents. The seeds were looked upon as part of the election funds of Congress. In an uncharacteristic move, Morton bought up the world’s supply of these seeds until none were left, leaving the statute ineffective. The issue developed into a minor crisis and the legislators had no intention of acquiescing. They passed a resolution for continuation of seed distribution without Cleveland’s approval.

In the years following his cabinet position, Morton was elected president of the National Sound Money League, an organization affiliated with the gold standard wing of politics. He authored a number of political monographs including *Fallacies of the Free Silver Arguments* (Washington, DC: s.n., 1985). He kept his political convictions alive by starting the weekly journal, *The Conservative*. He reluctantly endorsed William McKinley for president over his old foe, William Jennings Bryan. McKinley was a trade protectionist, an anathema idea to Morton, but had as his running mate a man much admired by Morton, Teddy Roosevelt. Also as part of the post-cabinet period, Morton became the first editor of the publication, *Illustrated History of Nebraska*, 3 vols. (Lincoln, NE: North & Co., 1905). He continued to cultivate his land in Nebraska, and over the years enlarged his home from a 4-room cabin to a 52-room mansion he called Arbor Lodge.

DRAWING IS FROM FRANK LESLIE’S ILLUSTRATED NEWSPAPER, MAY 13, 1882



Morton was the originator of Arbor Day, resulting in the planting of billions of trees throughout the world.



FOREST HISTORY SOCIETY COLLECTION

J. Sterling Morton, Secretary of Agriculture, and James Robison Cook, Secretary of the Weather Bureau.

Morton died in 1902 at the home of his son Paul. A special train brought the body from Chicago to Nebraska City. Morton's life had primarily revolved around politics where he was clearly at odds with the political mainstream, and yet remained a force to be considered. He was admired for adhering to his principles, and fighting for every conviction he possessed. Morton's legacy is in the area of agriculture, where he was one of the earliest conservationists, even before the term was known. He, more than any other, presented the idea of Arbor Day to the world. He once said, "Other holidays repose upon the past; Arbor Day proposes for the future." It has been estimated that over the intervening years, the efforts behind the idea has resulted in the planting of billions of trees throughout the world. Almost 100 years later, Arbor Day

helped spawn a new cultural upswell of environmental concern as Earth Day was first observed on April 22, 1970. The traditional Arbor Day continues to bring its conservation message and continues to inspire.

An additional legacy is to be found in the efforts of Morton's family. He and his wife had four sons, each who prospered in life. His son Mark became president of the Equitable Assurance Society; Paul became Secretary of the Navy under Teddy Roosevelt; and Joy became president of the salt company that bears the family name. Joy Morton inherited his father's love of tree and plant conservation, and went on to establish the Morton Arboretum in 1922, a 1500-acre outdoor museum bringing together plants, wildlife, and people. It is located 25 miles west of Chicago in Lisle, Illinois. Following the

death of J. Sterling Morton, the family donated the Nebraska City homestead to the state. The estate is now preserved as the Arbor Lodge State Historical Park.

In 1972, on the centennial of the first Arbor Day, the National Arbor Day Foundation was established. A non-profit organization with nearly 1 million members, the Foundation now supports Arbor Day celebrations through tree planting and educational programs. It also owns and operates the 260-acre Arbor Day Farm, which was part of Morton's original estate. More information can be found on their web site at www.arborday.org. □

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